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Operational Leadership of Major General Ulysses S. Grant  
during the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

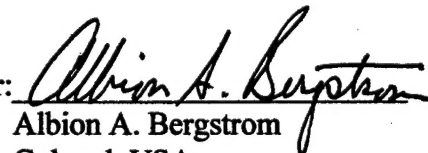
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Abstract of  
Operational Leadership of Ulysses S. Grant during the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863

This paper focuses on General Ulysses S. Grant's Operational Leadership during the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863. It is a critical look at the key operational leadership traits vision, boldness and strength of character while concentrating on his vision and decision making cycle. The overall success of this campaign is attributed to General Grant's performance as an operational commander. The take aways from this paper are the lessons learned from analysis of his actions during the planning and execution of the operation.

The investment and capture of Vicksburg will be characterized as one of the greatest military achievements ever known. The conception of the idea originated solely with General Grant, ... ; a single mistake would have involved us in difficulty, but so well were all the plans mature; ...<sup>1</sup>

Admiral David Porter

## I. Introduction

Was Grant a drunken failure who could not hold a decent job outside the United States Army? Which Grant showed up to accept Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse? What Grant was the eighteenth President of the United States of America? Who is buried in Grant's tomb? These are the issues most often thought about when Ulysses S. Grant is mentioned. There is a little controversy surrounding this most unassuming officer, albeit a West Point graduate and the youngest three-star general at 42, who rose from obscurity to become not only a great military leader but also the eighteenth President. Ulysses S. Grant was a man who did not command much respect during the Civil War and who still takes a back seat to his more famous Southern counterpart of those times, Robert E. Lee.

What was it that set General Grant apart from his contemporaries? Many of whom had the same military schooling, training, mentoring and experience that he had. Why did President Lincoln pick Grant to be his General-in-Chief?

You must tell me the brand of whiskey Grant drinks; I would like to send a barrel of it to my other generals ...<sup>2</sup>

Lincoln in November 1863 to an advisor

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, Partners in Command: The Relationship Between Leaders in the Civil War (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 178.

<sup>2</sup> James Marshall-Cornwall, Grant as Military Commander (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1970), iii.

Grant never campaigned for the job, but his actions spoke louder than any words. Grant may very well have been the first U.S. military commander who correctly applied leadership to operational art. He was a man who displayed the qualities and attributes - vision, boldness and strength of character (confidence and decision making ability) - of a great operational commander. This paper will illustrate the influence of Major General Ulysses S. Grant's operational leadership during the planning and conduct of the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863, and why he made a difference.

## **II. Operational Leadership**

... a distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable.  
No man who is not born bold can play such a role, and  
therefore we consider this quality the first prerequisite of the  
great military leader.<sup>3</sup>

Carl von Clausewitz

In order to define operational leadership, it is first necessary to determine what leadership means. In a military sense it can be construed as "the art of indirect influence and the skill of putting units and soldiers together in a positive action-oriented manner to create the conditions for success."<sup>4</sup> Operational leadership then, is the application of operational art by commanders and their representatives. A more complete definition might be "that component of operational art that researches and studies all the aspects of the practical work of the commanders and staffs to translate national or theater-strategic aims and tasks into

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<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, On War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Werner W. Banisch, "Leadership at the Operational Level," Army, August 1987, 57.

militarily attainable operational or strategic objectives.”<sup>5</sup> The leader of these operations is considered to be the operational commander. The U.S. Army considers a competent and confident officer to be the most essential dynamic of combat power.<sup>6</sup> The operational commander is the key to operational success for he provides the purpose and direction, and is responsible for the planning and execution of military operations. The commander must see to the unified and coordinated actions of all forces to meet the ultimate objective.

It is not enough that the leader just understand and correctly apply operational art to command. The operational commander must have certain qualities or traits that set him apart from other commanders. He must have a certain boldness to operate “outside the box”, the courage to follow his convictions despite the resistance he might receive and the self-confidence to believe what he is doing is right. Just as important to the operational commander are two attributes that he must possess. First, a commander’s vision is necessary not only to drive him to his aim or objective but also to provide the roadmap for his followers to get there. Second, the commander must be confident and tough enough to make critical decisions and accept the responsibility that goes along with it. It is a lonely business at the top, and the mental load and strain can be heavy at times. It is not easy for the commander to direct operations where there is a high probability of casualties or where the consequences for

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<sup>5</sup> Milan Vego, On Operational Art (2nd Draft) (The United States Naval War College: Joint Military Operations Department, 1998), 252.

<sup>6</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 100-5 Operations (14 June 1993) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), p. 2-11.

mistakes are catastrophic. He must have confidence in himself and his subordinates. How a commander makes these tough decisions will depend on his strength of character.

### III. Strategic Setting in the West

... The general who understands war is the minister of the people's fate and arbiter of the nation's destiny.<sup>7</sup>

Sun Tzu

The Vicksburg campaign held significance to both sides of the war. Geographically the Mississippi River split the Confederacy in two, hence cities on the mighty river would by pure location be of strategic importance. The side that held the cities controlled the Mississippi River. The Union recognized the importance as early as the Anaconda Plan in 1861. Lincoln felt that the Mississippi River led to the heart of the Confederacy.<sup>8</sup> The great river linked the South's eastern and western states and the entire Confederacy to the rest of the world - a vital supply line. The South's interest in the river was apparent as their efforts to control the Mississippi hinged on the numerous forts constructed along its banks.

Vicksburg was a key bastion to the Confederacy. It fed the eastern states and supported the deep South through river and rail networks leading from the great river. The fortress itself was a combination of earthworks and gun batteries integrated into the natural obstacles of the terrain - it was extensive and formidable. "The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket!" Lincoln saw the city as an obstacle to be overcome

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<sup>7</sup> Sun Tzu, The Art of War edited by James Clavell. Translated by L. Giles, (New York: Delacorte, 1983), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall-Cornwall, 98.



and which once secured would complete control of the river and thence the Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> The problem Lincoln had was finding a general who could deliver it for him and the nation.

#### **IV. Historical Perspective of the Vicksburg Campaign**

General Henry Halleck lacked vision when he was commander of the Army of the Mississippi. He had no plans beyond the current operation and could not take advantage of any victory provided by his subordinate commanders (Grant at Forts Henry and Donelson) nor seize any type of initiative from them.<sup>10</sup> He never saw Vicksburg as the key to victory in the west much less the Mississippi River as the lifeline of the South.

Grant, on the other hand, immediately recognized the importance of Vicksburg and set about planning the ways to capture it. He saw the advantages of approaching the fortress from the south, but in the winter of 1862-1863 the rains had swollen the Mississippi River making this route untenable. He could not sit idle however when political pressure called for action. He planned a series of operations against Vicksburg not only to keep his army employed and the politicians happy but also to keep General John C. Pemberton, Confederate Commander, confused and off guard.<sup>11</sup> Though these operations, designed to find weaknesses in the Vicksburg defense, were all failures they served to allow Grant an

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<sup>9</sup> Earl S. Miers, The Web of Victory: Grant at Vicksburg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 31.

<sup>10</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 92.

<sup>11</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, Grant & Lee, A Study in Personality and Generalship (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 180.

opportunity to battle harden his troops, test his commanders and grade their performance. He had chosen his commanders, Generals William T. Sherman, James B. McPherson, John A. McClernand, Colonel Benjamin Grierson and Admiral David D. Porter, carefully. Grant had full confidence in their abilities with the sole exception of McClernand.

Grant thought long and hard about how to capture Vicksburg. After the many failures it became clear to him that the city could not be taken from the north or west but only from the east after cutting it off from the south and east.<sup>12</sup> He decided on a scheme to take Vicksburg in the rear. The overall plan called for the naval fleet of gunboats and transports to run the Vicksburg batteries from north to south at night under cover of darkness; march his army by land on the west bank of the Mississippi River south to an area below Vicksburg; use the fleet to cross his army to the east bank of the Mississippi River; march north and take the city from the rear.<sup>13</sup> This was a risky plan and though all his commanders advised against it, Grant was adamant and proceeded. His commanders executed their orders almost to perfection, with Sherman and Grierson responsible for deception operations north and east of Vicksburg that were critical to disguise the army's movements and hide Grant's true intentions from Pemberton. In the meantime, Admiral Porter had agreed to run the gauntlet of the guns of Vicksburg overlooking the Mississippi River with his gunboats and transports full of supplies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marshall-Cornwall, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, 133-134.

<sup>14</sup> Fuller, Grant and Lee, 181.

Grant and his army made the crossing to the east bank, a daring move in the face of the enemy. He established a forward supply base but then quickly abandoned it in favor of speed, mobility and the desire to retain the offensive initiative. He wanted to stay one step ahead of Pemberton. Grant made a critical decision to modify his plan after finding out that Major General Nathaniel Banks could not reinforce him from his position in southern Louisiana as previously planned. In response to Sherman's argument to postpone, fall back and reestablish a secure base at Memphis, Grant said "It was my judgment at the time that to make a backward movement as long as that from Vicksburg to Memphis, would be interpreted ... as a defeat ... There was nothing left to be done but to go forward to a decisive victory."<sup>15</sup> There was to be no argument - Grant would not be denied a crucial objective.

Grant now planned to attack the rear of Vicksburg, cut off the Confederate lines of communication to Jackson, prevent resupply of the garrison and secure his rear when he finally turned on Vicksburg. In order to economize his forces and concentrate his combat power, Grant took one of the boldest steps imaginable during war - he cut his own lines of communication to his supply base at Grand Gulf. He would now operate independently in enemy territory completely at their mercy. Grant's bold and audacious move completely surprised Pemberton. Grant's army quickly captured Jackson and sent General Joseph E. Johnston running while Pemberton was trying to cut his non-existent lines of communications. Grant cut Pemberton off from Johnston in a series of five separate engagements and forced him to retire back into Vicksburg. Grant's army assaulted the

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<sup>15</sup> T.J. Stiles, In Their Own Words: Civil War Commanders (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1995), 125.

Vicksburg works and when those failed laid siege to the fortress. Pemberton finally surrendered on 4 July 1863. Grant's losses were light (1,243 killed, 7,095 wounded, and 535 missing) in comparison to the South's (10,000 casualties and 37,000 captured).<sup>16</sup> The strategic significance, however, could not be measured.

## **V. Major General Grant's Operational Leadership**

I cannot spare this man. He fights!<sup>17</sup>  
Abraham Lincoln

Grant saw what no other department commander could, that Vicksburg was the vital point on the Mississippi River and could control the river: "Vicksburg was the only channel ... connecting the parts of the Confederacy divided by the Mississippi. So long as it was held by the enemy, the free navigation of the river was prevented."<sup>18</sup> Grant not only understood Lincoln's vision and accepted it as his own, but also communicated it down to his subordinates as a shared vision. Together with Sherman and Porter, Grant's vision was a united approach to the war, "a concentration of forces for an aggressive, raid-oriented strategy that fixed on the enemy soldiers, war resources and population as its primary objectives."<sup>19</sup> This approach would not just put down the rebellion, it would totally crush it. This was to be the focal point of his operations in the west and would consume all his efforts

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<sup>16</sup> Fuller, Grant and Lee, 183.

<sup>17</sup> Glatthaar, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs Volume 1 (Sampson, Low, Marston, 1885-86), 422.

<sup>19</sup> Glatthaar, 153.

until it was fulfilled. The political and economic implications were clear to him as he saw Vicksburg as one obstacle to the end of the war. The remote western theater of operations would make a difference in the total war effort. By this revelation, Grant had made the leap from a purely tactical commander to an operational one who saw the strategic importance of his mission and the role his army would have in it. Grant understood that he had to defeat the Confederate armies before him, but he also saw the "Big Picture" that destroying the South's capacity for war was the ultimate political objective.

Grant's boldness was displayed on several occasions during the campaign. His plan to move his army below Vicksburg past the gun batteries showed the courage and audacity that not even the daring Sherman approved of. This was not a conventional approach and it took close coordination and cooperation from all Grant's commanders. It was risky in every phase, from exposing his army to Vicksburg's guns on the movement south, exposing his supplies, gunboats and transports to direct fire from the gun batteries, to crossing the river potentially under enemy fire, and finally to lengthening the lines of communications to his main supply base at Memphis. Every indication told Grant that it could not possibly work and that he was gambling his army away, but he was bound and determined to proceed. The key aspect of Grant's plan was surprise and the enemy's lack of preparedness for his moves. He planned this with the realization that he had more freedom of action from Halleck in Washington, D.C. Grant was more creative and aggressive without the more conservative Halleck looking over his shoulder and governing every move he made. Grant also knew that his plan could seize the initiative from the enemy, shape the battlefield to his liking, and

force Pemberton and Johnston to react. Grant decided that the benefits outweighed the risks - Vicksburg was worth the chance and the costs to bring it under Union control.

He made perhaps the "boldest decision of the Civil War" after the river crossing when he decided to cut his own lines of communications.<sup>20</sup> The Mississippi River was still controlled by the Confederates, thus his supply line from the advance base at Grand Gulf back to Memphis was tenuous at best. He had earned an appreciation for cutting loose from his logistical base as a young officer working for Major General Winfield Scott during the Mexican War. A few months earlier Grant had experienced his own supply lines cut by the enemy at Holly Springs.<sup>21</sup> Rather than commit precious forces to protect his supply base and expose his lines to Pemberton and Johnston, he completely abandoned his supply lines, going against the advice of his subordinates and the standard doctrine of the times. Grant was now in the unenviable position operating behind enemy lines facing two separate forces, with limited supplies while trying to live off the land. This was certainly a courageous move that surprised senior leaders on both sides. Time, space and forces would now become critical factors for Grant and his army. He could not afford to prolong the capture of Vicksburg. Grant would require a highly mobile force, quick and decisive execution and the close coordination of his commanders to carry his plan off. His leadership turned it into a reality.

Grant had no fear of making difficult decisions even when under the stress of battle. He took his command responsibilities very seriously. He clearly understood the importance of his actions and drew from his knowledge and common sense to carefully analyze the

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall-Cornwall, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Glatthaar, 151.

situation before taking a certain course of action. Grant knew that the final two frontal attacks on the works of Vicksburg were sure to have high casualties, yet his mental process and his own mind's protective system based on previous experience subconsciously blocked the tragedy and thoughts of needless deaths. He was thinking of the future. His calm and quiet demeanor hid his emotions from all but his closest advisors. The soldiers' lives were not sacrificed in vain. He never forgot that the ultimate service was to the North's cause, and to that end he was totally committed. Despite the bloody battles, his army followed him for they too realized Grant was focused to a larger goal and would lead them to victory. Theirs was a quiet admiration for Grant, the soldier's general.

His decision to cut his own supply lines was a highly risky move aimed to seize the initiative in the face of the enemy. But Grant also knew his enemy, understood their intentions, anticipated their actions and acted promptly to take full advantage of the situation. It was dangerous because he faced two separate Confederate armies who were trying to reinforce each other and he was gambling on their slow movement and lack of coordination. Equally important with the decisions Grant made was the conviction that he went about executing them. Sherman marveled in the way Grant "completed your best preparations" and entered battle "without hesitation, ... no doubts, no reserve."<sup>22</sup> Such quiet conviction instilled confidence in those around him. Grant never lost his faith in his ability and certainly did not have any doubts about his commanders and his army. His determination to get the job done was all the motivation his commanders needed.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 144.

Grant was an unpredictable commander, flexible and adaptable, changing his plans several times to fit the battlefield situation. He acted decisively with moves that completely surprised the enemy commander, keeping him off balance. Pemberton never knew where to expect Grant to appear next. Johnston was caught completely unaware at Jackson. Grant thwarted their every move and frustrated their actions. During the river crossing, his deception plans were executed flawlessly. They were completely successful in masking Grant's true motives and showed his masterful planning.

The confidence in General Grant by his superiors and subordinates was unusually high. President Lincoln's confidence in the man began with his victories at Forts Henry and Donelson; continued during Grant's creativity, determination and resourcefulness in the various attempts on Vicksburg; and culminated after the general's campaign to cross the Mississippi River followed by his army's rapid victories before turning on the fortress city.<sup>23</sup>

My dear General ... When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg ..., and I never had any faith except that a general hope that you knew better than I, ... I thought you should go down the river and join General Banks; and when you turned northward ... I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong.<sup>24</sup>

Yours very truly  
A. Lincoln

Certainly Lincoln had his doubts about a general he had never met and who had a bad reputation with alcohol, yet here was Grant making moves that no one else dared and he was

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<sup>23</sup> Glatthaar, 194.

<sup>24</sup> Miers, 300.



successful. Lincoln was intrigued with Grant if anything else and liked his aggressive style but after Vicksburg he had his complete confidence and his admiration. Lincoln finally had himself a general who understood what he wanted and was not afraid to go after it. Grant could act decisively and with positive results - Lincoln saw this and chose him to be his General over all the other more senior and equally qualified officers.

Grant's subordinates were likewise mesmerized by his leadership. He had shown them that his true dedication was to the Union purpose above any personal gain. Vicksburg was the immediate objective and his vision above all else was unrestricted access to the entire Mississippi River. He was their mentor and had nurtured their professional growth personally - he knew what they could accomplish - after all he had picked them from his own mold.

Grant gave his commanders sufficient freedom of action to develop their own tactical maneuvers and plans allowing for their creativity and imagination in operations. During the dangerous river crossing, he gave clear and concise orders to his subordinate commanders on the conduct of the operations while leaving the details of their tactical engagement to their planning.<sup>25</sup> This type of freedom bound his commanders to him. Said Sherman, "I knew that wherever I was that you thought of me and if I got in a tight place you would come - if alive."<sup>26</sup> This allowed Sherman to fight with the reassurance that he could act boldly knowing that he had Grant's full support.

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<sup>25</sup> Marshall-Cornwall, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Glatthaar, 152.

Grant cultivated their trust and confidence with his leadership style where his commanders could openly comment and advise him on operations without fear of reprisal. Porter, clearly in a role of cooperating commander, voiced his caution to Grant about the consequences of moving his gunboats south of Vicksburg. Nevertheless, though Porter had his reservations about the bold plan, "So confident was I of the ability of General Grant to carry out his plans when he explained them to me, that I never hesitated to change my position from above to below Vicksburg."<sup>27</sup> Porter's admiration and respect for Grant was so deep that he completely supported any of Grant's plans. Grant's personal relationships with Sherman and Porter ensured their loyalty and devotion to him during the Vicksburg campaign and throughout the remainder of the war.

## **VI. Lessons for the Operational Commander**

The general must rely on his ability to control the situation to his advantage as opportunity dictates. He is not bound by established procedures.<sup>28</sup>

Sun Tzu

There are several lessons to be learned from Grant's campaign at Vicksburg. In today's world a successful operational commander must have a vision or long term plan. He must be in complete charge and focused toward that vision, looking to the future but not forgetting to manage the current. The commander must be able to sell his vision to his subordinates so that they carry it on as if it were their own, even in his absence. His vision

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 174

<sup>28</sup> Sun Tzu, 112.

should be clearly articulated and understood by all. Most important of all, the vision must be consistent with the overall political strategy and support its aims. The operational commander must be able to take national guidance and translate strategic objectives into an achievable military objective with which he can plan and conduct his operations. Once an operational commander correctly does this, he has understood the correct nature of the war. It is at the operational level of war that the professional military commander on the ground is the most qualified leader to make the operational decisions about the conduct of the war. A commander who has the freedom of action given to him will use his initiative and make independent decisions toward the accomplishment of the overall objective.

An operational commander must be capable of bold action and be willing to act "outside the box." That is, he must be willing to gamble with predictable factors and take calculated risks in the face of enemy actions and reactions. Boldness requires a certain amount of creativity and imagination for a commander's plan may call for unorthodox moves. The commander must use the flexibility of the doctrine to adapt to new situations and improvisation and ingenuity to make the most of the resources available, integrating and synchronizing them to accomplish the mission. The short of it however, is that the operational commander has to be much bolder than his adversary and be willing to take greater risk. If done carefully, the benefits will far outweigh the costs.

The operational commander must be able to make the tough choice. He must be decisive and have the moral courage to stand up for what he thinks is the right thing to do no matter the objections he may receive. He must avoid over reliance on the advice of others and temper it with wise counsel. The decision made must be made without personal goal and

be in the best interest of the nation and its ultimate goals. The commander must have the unshakable confidence in himself and his commanders to make rational decisions quickly and then execute faithfully. This means he must not only choose good people to work for him but also be confident to delegate authority to them to operate freely without constraint. This unshakable confidence can be infectious and permeated to his subordinates. He must be able to recognize his subordinates strengths and weaknesses, tapping into their individual talents and exploiting them to the maximum advantage. The operational commander must not be in charge of the front line but has to stand back and let his commanders do their work in accordance with the plans - with only deviations and changes needing approval. Clarity of those plans between the superior and subordinate will build that mutual trust and confidence.

## **VII. Conclusion**

General Grant's failures and successes at Vicksburg are well documented. It is difficult to state whether any other military commander could have achieved the same results. It should be noted however that Halleck and Farragut were not able to accomplish control of the Mississippi River and that no other generals captured the significance of Vicksburg to the total cause of the war. Grant's vision was a unique one for the generals of his time. He saw and understood the big picture, but more importantly knew what he had to do to get to the end state and then did it.

History and experience are important instruments in a commander's toolbox and if Grant's operational leadership during the Vicksburg campaign shows us anything, it is that his moves and decisions were strokes of genius and should be studied. His vision and

steadfast determination coupled with his courage and audacity were the keys to his success and should be emulated. Grant's command influence over his subordinate commanders was superb. He could communicate clearly to them and expect execution of his intent. The boldness of his plan notwithstanding Grant could not have succeeded alone.

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